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## ARTITUDE

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## SPK



Shan Leong &amp; Graeme Revell/ Machine Age Voodoo

Before SPK, Graeme Revell used to work as a male nurse in an Australian mental hospital. He started the group in early 1978 to exploit some of the outrage he felt against the abuses he had witnessed. The initials SPK actually come, sometimes, from *Socialists Patients Kollektiv*, a group of West German mental patients who, inspired by Baader-Meinhof, tried unsuccessfully to form a radical left-wing among their fellow inmates. SPK the music group has always kept their original intentions: to make explicit the fascism of oppression and the exploitation being committed under the guise of science and psychopathology. Understanding this, it is not surprising that it took them more than six years to be signed to a major label. *Machine Age Voodoo* is on Elektra UK [In this country, Elektra has actually rereleased the original "Metal Dance" single].

Revell in 1983 told the now-inoperative *Adventures In Reality* magazine that SPK had gone as far as it could on its independent footing. The sound must change with the alterations in ways of working and sources of funding. The sounds of *Machine Age Voodoo* are those of funk bass and keyboards, vocal harmonies, dance-synth rhythms and heavy, crashing metal percussion. They have bridged the gap from *Leichenschrei* (portions of which overtly copy primitive musics) to modern, high-tech dance/disco/funk (or Voodoo, if you will).

An early SPK release, *Live at the Crypt* (Sterile Tapes) was taken from a live concert given in 1980. It is as far away from a song like "Junk Funk" as the

ambience of a construction site is from the songs on [New York disco station] WKTU-FM. That embryonic show was a barrage of noise; faintly melodic, but mostly disturbing to the nervous system. No doubt the stage show included their usual barrage of visuals—slides, photos, and films dealing with mental patients, scientific experiments on the human body, and deformed children (hunt up some of the articles they published in *Re/Search* magazines to get a sense of their visual approach). One of their videos of the period was a graphic documentary on autopsy.

Much of SPK's music has downplayed lyrics, using them very sparsely (albeit effectively). On *Machine Age Voodoo* on the other hand there is a virtual explosion of lyrics, powerfully drawn and deeply insightful. They reveal a common sensibility with the band that recorded *Leichenschrei*. It is tempting even to say that the musics are not far removed from each other: they are similar if not equal in temperament.

SPK deal with powerfully disturbing material, but it would be inaccurate to label them (as so many bands of their 'kind' have been labelled) doomsters. In their music is actually a rush of uplifted ecstasy, even in songs that deal graphically with S&M mutilation, as with *Auto Da Fe*'s "A Heart that Breaks in No Time or Place," which closes Side Two. Certainly there is moral outcry and humanist outrage at the sins of the world, and at the pain and suffering caused by evil men and their evil practices (such as concentration camps and the impersonal buildings of the modern Metropolis); but underneath it all is that violent outburst of joy:

*Feel the magic of the dance  
Let your mind slip into a trance  
Everybody, everybody get together  
In ritual celebration*

—"Junk Funk"

SPK has made their performances a source of "ritual" utilizing staging, lighting, film, video, and—of course—music to stir that sense of communal and psychic revelation. This is not 'doom and gloom'; this is pure altruism—the energy of optimism. Their formula for the unification of all men has been perhaps a bit too idealistic; but there is constructive passion. There are now clear hints of Chinese Communism ("With Love From China"):

*We'll shape the soul of industry  
We'll strike the blow that fires the fire  
We'll stand in line with proud profile  
And face in silhouette, the Red Star  
With one great cry we'll join in song  
Then I'll come to you, with love from China*

And what about "industrial?" The concept of machine-age voodoo implies an 'industrial' magic (or a magical industry). A favorite author of Revell's, JG Ballard, writes entire novels about how the landscapes upon which we live determine our psychic and psychological structures. In the industrial age (see his book *Crash!*) the cities are the landscapes; the machines are extensions of our own psyches, and our minds are in fact merged with the landscape. In Ballard, highway clover-leaves and the concrete mazes of suburban streets reflect an interior consciousness.

In Revell's interview with Ballard (*Re/Search* #9/10), the group founder shows a particular interest in Ballard's use of mythology. Ballard claims that he is writing "myths of the future," whereas other cultures have always written myths of the past. Our mythological consciousness is replete with our own machines: cars, computers, buildings, houses, televisions, movie projectors; and the Olympian Gods are the mythological movie stars—Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, John Wayne (see *Hello America* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*). These are the myths of the machine age, the myths of the coming Apocalypse. There is not a very wide gap at all between the visions of JG Ballard and those of SPK on *Machine Age Voodoo*.

On "One World," far-eastern percussive music (is it from Indochina?) becomes a funky synth song with the same percussive rhythms. It is an important moment on the record; in it can be found the genealogy of modern funk/disco/dance music. Amplified instruments, the musics of jazz, rock, funk, and dance were developed and are being played by urban musicians who live in the wasted landscapes of our cities. Still other and more primitive influences come from blues, folk, and country-western.

SPK could not however have developed in the backwaters of the Ozarks. The band came from modern cities, living among the twisted minds and bodies of the men of the "New Dark Age," with technology's imprints all over their bodies like Ballard's characters, whose faces bear the weird designs and scars of auto wrecks and jagged metal.

The liner notes of the album are designed with shafts of wheat; songs are replete with social outrage ("One world/Third world/The rich get richer/Poor stay poor") and cries of oppression ("Feel like fire/Feel like ice/Dying in this silver city/Can't accept this life of lies"). One hears a strong cry of revolt against the Metropolis, the

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Silver City, the murderous wasteland of machine death and decay that we are born on, grow up on, live on, and eventually get buried in. The cycle is endless; it repeats itself because of the docile complacency of its victims:

See them marching row on row  
Work your fists down to the bone  
The government rewards you for your pains  
No you can't survive on hope  
Or opiates like coke or soap  
You'll learn to love your chains

So what is SPK doing on Elektra UK? Simple; using the resources of Metropolis against itself. "Metal Dance" was a big hit; it sold a lot of records and made the

dance charts. But in the new version of that song, Sinan Leong sings "Can you see that Reconstruction's underway?" In the new world of hope and faith and the unification of man, there will be no room for an Elektra Records exploiting musical talent or the gullible record-buying public.

SPK uses tools in an effective, efficient, potent, and successful manner. In this sense they are high-techno recording musicians. They utilize "the magic of the dance," "the rhythm in your bones," and "the power in your soul." By moving forward into high-tech they are also moving backwards; reversing the moments in which music became eaten alive by Metropolis.

—Richard Behrens

[*Machine Age Voodoo* is scheduled for American release on January 25 on Elektra US. For a more complete listing of SPK's discography, check *Re/Search's Industrial Culture Handbook* (#6/7), or write A/a]

## SLAP



Good fortune and simple luck were the elements of my introduction, about a year ago, to the music of The Happiness Boys, from Miami. In their work one can discern a skillful interweaving of American, Latin, and African rhythmic forms. The band, which is or was comprised of Edward Bobb and Stephen Nester, intelligently espoused what the early New Wave claimed to have stood for—a redefinition of commercially accessible music through the infusion of new ideas, new techniques, and new technology. Their two EP's on Duotone Records (their own label) adapted computer instruments as well as electric guitars and real percussion to a presentation of music as collage, and as constant rhythmic shift; as evolution. These records are *Meat Parade* (1982) and *Resident Alien* (1983); both are still in print. In music as well as in video, as well as in dance, The Happiness Boys displayed far more of an affinity with *musique concrete* and the work of Nam June Paik than with anything like MTV fare. For this reason, the work could be far more unyielding, and for the uninitiated, unrelenting.

Whether or not The Happiness Boys still exist is uncertain—I'm inclined to think not. However Stephen Nester has come up with a new recording and performance unit, and this is SLAP. The first release under that name is album-length, and this is certainly preferable to having yet another short EP. The expansion in terms of time mirrors a widening of musical perceptiveness—which is a roundabout way of describing a noticeable maturity of composition.

In a press release, Nester is clear, perhaps too clear, about the musical traditions

into which SLAP delves:

"Exploration of sound and visual mediums. Ideas and inspiration from  
Dadaists  
Abstract Expressionists  
African rhythms  
'Industrial' music  
Sounds and visuals of twentieth century technology  
Everything."

Forget how pretentious that may sound—because it isn't. He means it and it's true. But focus right now upon the visual concentration in that list. The fact is that this material from Miami is uncharacteristically worldly, and that the importance of video and ballet dance in every part of the work lends to it a sensibility (break that down: sense-ability; the ability to test the awareness of the senses) which few recording artists, working in so-called new music, actually have—maybe Cabaret Voltaire; certainly Laurie Anderson.

Nester is also clear about his attempts to coordinate ear with eye, with his methods to construct music with a painter's sensory orientation:

"SLAP—THE RECORD

Raw, dark intensity

Rhythmic muscularity coupled with textured and emotional landscapes.

Greyed colors [paralleling the grey disc label]...

Layering of sound on canvas.

Merging audiences of experimental art with those of funk/rock/jazz..."

...All of which is punctuated, of course, by the Duotone motto "Yes. Loud."

Again, these statements are neither vulgar boasts nor overanxious exaggerations; these are concrete truths.

It doesn't end with that either, for another part of what we see is the words we read. The package that is SLAP is further decorated and enhanced (for it's got to be more than simple decoration) by cryptic and curiously poetic statements; I don't know what the hell they have to do with anything. "Nine lives lived in vain, reflected in a bloodshot mirror," reads one on the outer sleeve; "Between Heaven and your pillow, with heart and tongue we'll celebrate the day of our birth. Finding that ancient refuge, we'll dream with eyes open of Eden...now," reads another.

There is also the matter of what is written on the record labels (you can skip over this part if I'm boring you). Make what you will out of these exchanges, like perversions of joke-book material:

Him: There's a hole in my heart that's letting in all this rain.

Her: You're on dangerous ground."

"Her: Closed chapter or an open book?

Him: You're right. I'm not sure about anything anymore."

It remains only that the music of SLAP be discussed. Beginning slowly and cautiously with a one-chord riff in the bass, "She Said No" quickly builds into a swirling funk-out, with sequencer lines spinning around the riff like satellites around a planet (whoa). Next, after some hesitation (and police sirens) "Overdog" restores the musical theme at a different tempo. Closing Side One, after "Eden Now," "The Bandage Hour" very nearly introduces the theme again, but here it's been altered with all the subtlety (or at least some of it) of a Bach symphonic piece, its texture slowly disclosing an underlying Moroccan rhythm.

Side Two displays why SLAP is better at album-length than it might have been as an EP. As The Happiness Boys, pieces tended not to exceed five minutes; here SLAP can develop its musical language, as it does with the six-minute "Eden Now," and with the album closer "Elegy," a firm and stately piece of electronic minimalism that is ten minutes long. This track, with background tapes from a television, is distinguished by a fine and Tuxedomoon-esque electric violin solo by Vicki Richards.

After all the packaging and the self-penned descriptions, this is the true and tangible SLAP, modifying the ideas of new music and the technology of modern pop for a hybrid that is fascinating, perhaps all the more so because it comes from a place as unlikely as Florida. Or is that City-centrism?

I caution interested parties that Duotone records tend not to be readily available, however I have seen both Happiness Boys records for sale at Tower. Best to inquire with this magazine, or to copy the address from the back of those records.

—Carl Howard

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# WHITEHOUSE



Whitehouse makes the kind of sound that can be questioned; could it ever develop, in a musical sense? In a performance sense? How does Whitehouse go about maturing?

The group actually receives a good deal of attention in this country from writers whose viewpoints are quite different, but whose questions are essentially valid: Is Whitehouse being ultra-serious, or on the other hand completely facetious? Are they being absolutely introverted, or so theatrically extroverted as to be impersonal?

I don't claim to understand (or to not understand) Whitehouse; my own answer to these questions is, as with any good performance unit, a balance of extremes must be struck, especially if it is Whitehouse's aim to investigate the extreme.

In the past, the effect of Whitehouse's sound—with its merciless walls of feedback and electronics (a music like the pale aura of death) beneath the frenzied and near-psychotic vocalizing of William Bennett—has been to elucidate a kind of angst that exists in England today. They've done this in a way and with a clarity that even the early punk movements were unable to achieve. Perhaps this is because their own brand of politics has more to do with the physical body than with topical (and therefore self-dating) events. Whitehouse's target area is human vulnerability. There has always been a particular concentration, for example, upon genitalia, shit, and the asshole. These most tender contact points are violated by them with violent force.

And yet there is a concern that the sound should be presented professionally. Bennett, in a recent interview for *Unsound* magazine, asserted his awareness of another public misconception—that all 'noise' groups sound the same. His own contention was that this misconception may stem from the poor quality that many noise outfits' recordings have; that a band such as Ramleh could make far more of an impact with their recordings if the quality were better.

This in mind, Whitehouse (Bennett, Kevin Tomkins, and Philip Best) made the decision to record their latest LP in a proper studio; this being IPS, the studio of choice for more than a few progressive artists working away from the London area. The LP is *Great White Death*, and it can be thought of as important enough to be called not so much a redefinition of the group's sound, but in fact a *definition* of it.

Actually, over the course of the record's two sides, the questions that were posed at the beginning of this article become irrelevant and disappear. The serious import of pieces with titles like "Rapemaster" and "Ass-Destroyer" is not to be denied, and yet there's something so—how to say this?—*dubious* in the vocal delivery of Bennett; something that undercuts and simultaneously reaffirms the seriousness.

Yes, of course it's theatrical; there are elements in Whitehouse that recall twentieth-century arguments for cruelty and the spectacle. The spectacle, it is said, is a kind of organized **chaos**—so how can only one emotion be involved?

Now, let's clarify this—the argument here is not that Whitehouse or Ramleh or even the old Coum Transmissions (Throbbing Gristle's precursor, if you don't know) are deliberately making and marketing spectacles. Certainly there is an element of the spectacular, of the magic(k?)al; but spectacles themselves don't generally exist anymore, no matter how often they're abstractly discussed. Debacles exist, but that's another story. The contention here is that Whitehouse does not, and most probably *would* not, attempt to synthesize the spectacle in five-minute audio tracks.

Yet within the realm of the theatrical and the ambiguous, Whitehouse conjurs the very emotions that make critics question their motives. There is for example a track on *Great White Death* called "You Don't Have to Say Please," that in this light is particularly—um—revealing. The lyrics begin:

"Get down on your knees  
You don't have to say please  
...Suck my cock."

The humor in this is inherent in Bennett's delivery, throwing the last line in, as he does, as if it were a punchline. It's enough to make one reflect: "No. I don't want to."

This is also true because Bennett, for the first time that I've heard it anyway, adopts here a new voice: In addition to the psycho-falsetto, there is a low, gruff, commanding voice that makes him sound like a big fat ignorant beer-guzzling truck driver. The voice is difficult to take seriously, especially when it growls, on Side Two, "I'm cumminupyerass!" As a joke, he milks it for all it's worth, and yet this can hardly be called a softening of image—though we may all be hardened and even burnt out on the themes of exploitation and hardcore pornography in music, the fact remains that this still horrifies our senses of morality and (again) personal vulnerability.

The fact also remains that, well-recorded or not, this record is no more 'commercially' accessible (or even viable) than was their "Shitfun" series of several years ago. *Great White Death* does however go a long way in clearing up some of those nasty questions about their ambiguity: It's all part of the stew. Whitehouse is very simply a group of performers putting on a very unusual show; providing some confusion is just an inevitable part of the act.

—CH

## What sort of man reads...



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# INTERVIEW: CHRISTIAN MARCLAY



Marclay on phonoguitar and Elliott Sharp on Ceresole

Although a major part of his life was spent in Switzerland making sculptures, Christian Marclay and his music fit snugly and successfully into the progressive sphere initiated by New York City's 'downtown' musicians. He has a background of performance and of plastic art forms, and gives his shows a conscious/unconscious sense of multi-media orientation.

As William Burroughs and Brion Gysin cut up the word, and as John Cage and David Tudor cut up the sound, so do these artists also cut up the past, fragmenting our orientation of linear history, shuffling all time into a kind of absolute present—and this we call experience.

Christian Marclay experiences material from the past, distorts it, creates it, explodes it. His instruments are products reengaged as processes—old vinyl recordings played, destroyed, garbled, reinterpreted, revitalized. Not only is he using waste products as entertainment, but the products themselves are disposed of, thrown away by their owners for being scratched or otherwise outmoded. We consume entertainment, we throw it away; Marclay uses it again. Art, entertainment, and irony.

Among those with whom Marclay has worked, one can list Elliott Sharp, John Zorn, and David Moss. Early 1985 will see the premiere of his first operatic piece, an ambitious project entitled *Dead Stories*.

On a Saturday last October, Marclay performed for an evening at a space called Roulette (228 West Broadway). A dimly-lit table held seven phonographs, stacks upon stacks of records, and several wires running to one central input bank. Marclay, dressed completely in black, meditatively spun two "Disc Compositions," #39 *Time Square*, and #40 *Untitled*. The audience responded enthusiastically.

At his East Village apartment, he admitted that his compositions are not so much fixed as constantly reshaping. *Time Square* could have absorbed pieces #18 and #25 (random numbers), and pieces #56 and #72 may, in turn, absorb *Time Square*. Thus Marclay's work is all the more a study of evolution.

The apartment itself has a room devoted entirely to Marclay's art. That means thousands upon thousands of sleeved and unsleeved old records, including about 200 (hardly more) which he isolates for his own entertainment. Here also are some of his 'disc sculptures,' carefully intercut slabs of color-vinyl discs *cum* mosaics, set so carefully that they still play. One of his discs is a rotating saw blade, the kind that cuts Polly Pureheart in twain as she's tied to the wooden log in the old lumber mill. Some of his other physical constructions include a "phonoguitar," an explanation of which follows close at hand.

Marclay and I sit and chat over a bottle of something clear, Finnish, and merciless. What is discussed is eminently revealing...

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**Q:** What's the greatest number of turntables you ever had going at once?

**A:** Eight. Eight, plus a to-and-fro number, which is a little machine I have. It actually scratches automatically, goes back and forth at different speeds.

**Q:** I would expect that the work you do would involve a certain amount of invention.

**A:** There's another turntable I built called a phonoguitar, which I strap around my neck; I only use guitar records on it. Jimi Hendrix - Heavy Metal.

**Q:** Laurie Anderson had a violin like that about ten years ago.

**A:** Right; I saw it in a show.

**Q:** How long have you been doing this work?

**A:** I started about 1979-1980, when I lived in Boston. I was performing in a duet called The Bachelors, even, with a guitar player. I was mostly singing, and then I started to use records as my instrument because I couldn't play any other. So I was doing vocals and playing records.

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Halt and step into flashback. The Bachelors, even, were interviewed in *Re/Search* #2 by Bond Bergland, then still of Factrix. The article included pictures of a 'drum-guitar' (the drum part being an African percussive device built into the fretboard) and something that looks like a combination organ-accordion. Said Marclay at the time, on the question of electronic instruments, "Our sounds are more human, in a way. It's a physical relationship to a sound-producing object. This allows for a physical understanding as well." It is easy to discern that this thinking stays with Marclay to the present day.

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**A:** Eventually the band disappeared. I moved to New York and continued with this work.

**Q:** You've met a lot of interesting performers around here.

**A:** Yeah—it was great for me to come here, and to be able to play my turntables with musicians who played more traditional instruments, and to perform in a lot of pieces by John Zorn. It was great to be able to combine recordings with a variety of real instruments. I played in a band called Mon Ton Son, a trio with a violinist and guitarist, and me on turntables. So I've experimented with different combinations; now I play in a band with Mark Cunningham on trumpet and Mark Miller on drum machine. I also play a lot with David Moss.

**Q:** When you were starting to do this, how would you convince a performance space that something like this would draw people?

**A:** Well, I don't know if it was convincing people; I just did it and had a lot of fun doing it. People heard me and asked me to either play with them or play in their space.

**Q:** Do audiences expect that you're going to do something like scratching?

**A:** Well yeah, sort of, because of the Rap movement, and all of these scratch DJ's, they sort of expect me to do that.

**Q:** On Zorn's *Locus Solus* it's strange, because on *Side One* there you are, and on *Side Four* there's this scratcher. So I suppose it's possible to draw a similarity. An information sheet passed out by Roulette mentioned that your work and scratching evolved "parallel timewise, but completely independently from Rap music."

**A:** Right; they evolved simultaneously. I was unaware of the other until '81 or '82, I think. That was when I first heard of Grand Master Flash. First time I saw him live. I feel very removed from that whole movement. I'm not interested in just keeping a dance beat going indefinitely.

**Q:** By now you have certain pieces in which you know the order of the records, and some of them even have names.

**A:** Right. When I prepare a show, I structure my pieces. There's a chronology—I know which record I'm going to use, in which order. I work out my transitions and the relationships between one record and the other. But because of the quality of the equipment and the material, because of the fragility of the records and their minute nature, I can't always be exact. I can see where certain parts of the records are; depending on the way the light shines on them, you know if it's a high pitch or a low. I also make notes on the records, or put stickers on them to indicate where a sequence begins.

**Q:** Oh, I thought that those were like white chips to make the needle jump.

**A:** I do use them, for two reasons—either to indicate where a segment that I want to use starts, or to stop the needle and create a skip or loop. So there is an order, a composition that's established; but within the composition there's a lot of room for improvisation.

**Q:** You have a piece in which you use seven copies of the same record at one time.

**A:** Yeah; sometimes I don't know exactly what record is producing the sound that I want to interrupt. I might interrupt something I don't want to; so I have to, well, not fake it, but... at least play with the errors. Errors become important musical moments. The clicks and pops from scratches are sometimes incidental, sometimes intentional. But if they are incidental, I have to accept them as an integral part of the composition. So I have to listen for those things; and if suddenly the record, because of a scratch, decides to loop, I have to decide—do I interrupt the loop, or do I let it go and play along with it? So all of those accidents change slightly the shape of the composition.

There's also something pleasant about the pops on a record. If you listen to an old jazz radio program, 78 rpm recordings, there's something about that noise that's so associated with early recordings that you can't ignore it, and it becomes part of the music. Part of the nostalgia that's attached to it. It's like looking at an old photograph—yellow, crinkled, almost disappeared; you look at it with a certain emotion, a different one than when you look at a glossy, color photograph of today. And I think the same emotion exists when you listen to an old recording. What creates the emotion is the poor recording—if you want to say, maybe the grooves of time, the scratches of time. Time has left its fingerprints on the record as well as the artist who recorded it. The same with 1970's rock n roll; there's already a sense of nostalgia.

**Q:** Tape manipulation goes back about thirty-five years. Record manipulation, except for club mixing, goes back to only the last few years.

**A:** Yes, the tape recorder was only invented in the 'fifties, but before that if you wanted to experiment with a recording, you had to use a record. And a few people did; like Darius Milhaud, in the late 'twenties, already experimented with variable-speed turntables. Then, the only way you could record a sound was to do it directly onto a lacquer. That was the only way you could record a sound at the time. Even though the machines were simple and crude, they thought about it and experimented with it. When the tape appeared, it was easier. With a pair of scissors you can do some marvels.

At the beginning of *Musique Concrete*, in the early 'fifties, people like Pierre Schaffer and Pierre Henry, those people had access to lacquer recordings in the French Radio studio. Actually, a lot of the early *Musique Concrete* recordings were





Marclay at the turntables © Fred de Vos

done with rejected recordings from the studio. They would have an artist come in and directly record on the record; and of course if he made a mistake that record would be put aside. And Pierre Schaffer had access to piles of those outtakes. That's how he started. So to say that the use of records in music today is something new is wrong. John Cage used phonograph records a lot in his early pieces.

But I would say that the sensibility of mixing different sounds together has definitely originated from the possibilities that magnetic tape offered. When the multitrack tape recorder was invented, it opened up possibilities. Now you can't make a commercial record with less than twenty-four tracks. To think of different sounds as units that you then mix for a final composition, that is an idea that exists naturally in every musician today.

**Q: Can you see having a system of maybe twenty-thirty turntables?**

**A:** Yeah, maybe with a group of other players. As one individual it's difficult enough to manipulate eight turntables. There's already such density in the recording of one record because of the multitracking, that if you have twenty records going on at the same time, you get such a density that it's a little confusing. But if you want that confusion, which I sometimes do, I play sections with really dense overtones in which all the turntables are going at different speeds at the same time.

**Q: You're working on this operatic piece, which is called what?**

**A:** *Dead Stories*. All the instrumental parts are generated by records, and a lot of the singing as well. The singers are Arto Lindsay, David Moss, Susie Timmons, David Garland, and Susan Delhim. I chose them for their very unique and contrasting ways of singing.

**Q: Do you have any original lyrics that you're composing?**

**A:** I'm using lyrics that I lifted from the records, as well as original lyrics, and a lot of non-verbal singing. The idea is a non-narrative lyrical piece that will use a lot of fragments from different stories. All of them meshing together to create an almost final story, that would be left open for the listener. I don't want to enforce one story; I want to give for interpretation a mixture of stories.

**Q: I was thinking that someone could ask you, "Where's the tradition?" and all you'd have to do would be to point at the records and say "This is the tradition I come from. All these people; all their work."**

**A:** Right. I think that my influences are there. This is the music I listen to, these are the different images I look at; even though I grew up in a country where I haven't been bombarded by media images and television as much as a lot of young Americans have been and are, I still have to put up with a constant flow of media information. I am a child of the media. And all these influences come out in my work; I think it's a way of reacting to all of it.

**Q: Where is *Dead Stories* going to be performed?**

**A:** It's this art organization called Just Above Midtown, and in December they'll be producing a videotape version; so first we're going to work on the video version. Then in February, although the space hasn't been chosen yet, it will be staged. It was already performed twice as a work in progress last spring.

**Q: I was wondering what it would look like visually.**

**A:** Oh, visually... costumes, props, images. Maybe some moving images, I'm not sure. The live version and the video version will be quite different. I want it to be a music-theater presentation, and not just a recital.

**Q: When you go around looking for records, what kind of things are you looking for?**

**A:** Everything that's cheap. I like what people throw out. I find a lot of records on the streets, and in garbage cans. A lot of people give me all the records they don't want. And I like that. I like to be able to come up with something that's obviously rejected; consumed material. I listen to it when people have gotten tired of it and throw it out. Or they scratch it and they can't bear to listen to it.

**Q: A lot of what's thrown out is what clubs can't use from two months ago.**

**A:** There's such a consumption in this city. There is such a waste here; it's the best city in the world to do what I'm doing. Every day I find a record lying in the street. Old 78's, nobody wants them.

**Q: How do you decide which records you're going to play and which you're going to smash [in performance]?**

**A:** Some of it is hard to use, either because the music itself is too dense, or it has a beat that I don't like or something. I tend to look out for instrumental records. If I use vocals, then I scavenge them from somewhere else and put them on top.

**Q: How deeply do you get into the visual aspect of a performance?**

**A:** Well, I think it's important to have a visual presentation, especially because of what I do; I need to show how the sounds are produced. The mechanical aspect is important.

**Q: At the *Roulette* show, I don't know if you were dressed all in black for a reason, but that's the same color as most records.**

**A:** Yeah. The table was lit, and I wanted to be sort of in the back, in the dark. The main thing being the records, there is a distance between me, the performer, and the music. Because of the nature of the instrument, a turntable is not a very physical device. It's not like a regular instrument that you have around your neck, or blow in, or squeeze between your breasts; it's a very distant, cold machine, and it tends to play by itself.

**Q: There seems to be a kind of sexual relationship between you and the record and the tone arm.**

**A:** Well, maybe the fact that the hard needle is sliding into the grooves...shiny vinyl...maybe that's very sexual. But one has to have a perverted eye to see those things.

**Q: You manipulate the record, the tone arm, the speeds. But if you were to come up with your own turntables, would the speeds go up to like 107 and down to 2, or go at a consistent speed backwards? Do you manipulate the machines as well?**

**A:** Well yeah, there's a few transformations that I can do, but I haven't really built any turntables. I've used different motors that will go to a faster speed. I've worked with the tone arm, like having two tone arms on the same record. I do play the records backwards, manually. I don't have a mixer, so I adjust the volume controls directly on the turntables. I have on and off switches so I can cut in or cut out a sound very quickly; I also use a wah-wah pedal.

**Q: You know the sort of things that kids do, just spinning their records backwards, and then their parents come in and say, "What are you doing? You'll break the machine!"**

**A:** I think a lot of people do react like that when they see me, and there's strong impact with people who've been taught to take care of their records. Records are such fragile objects, and if you don't take care of them you destroy the recording. So people have a strong reaction when I do scratch a record; they feel uneasy, especially if they're record collectors.

**Q: It goes against the grain, and if you start smashing something...**

**A:** You don't have to smash it to create a strong reaction. Just a little scratch is already something. You react to it, and you sort of know right away that there's a mistake involved; there's a wrongdoing. I like to disturb people's expectations.

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The interview now concluded with the arrival of guitarist and sax player Elliott Sharp. Sharp, also an improv musician, has often worked with Marclay, as well as countless others. He also heads Zoar Records, whose LP release *State of the Union* features an excellent Marclay piece called "Disc Composition #23." A duet between he and Sharp can be heard on *(T)here*, which is also on Zoar. Finally, duets between Marclay and the very strange David Moss can be heard on the latter's LP *Full House*, which is a

West German Moers  
Music release.

—Questions/  
Commentary:  
Carl  
Howard



Recycled Record Sculpture / © 1983 Ellen Page Wilson



Cover detail/ Step Forward

A turning point in the recognition of Portion Control's career came, I'm sure, last spring when they toured Europe in support of *Blancmange* (yes, now *a/l* Americans know how to spell that word!). Band manager and proprietor of In Phaze Records Pat Bermingham described the tour to me like this: "I spent a few days on the tour. Nice to meet real teenyboppers...a true challenge for PC, that one."

The foremost example of this new feeling is probably best expressed in "Havoc Man," which is PC's next single for *Illuminated*. The chorus goes like this: "There is hope and there is vision/Angry looks pass me by. Cradled in your indecision/I really wonder/Wonder why." This is a far cry from the more desolate spirit of "Rough Justice" or "Raise the Pulse."

Now, I don't happen to believe that *..Step Forward* is a perfect collection. Perhaps it's that some of the lyrics don't bite me hard enough, don't chew me to bits. Some of them. Also there's the fact that to the untrained ear the record is an explosion of 'Eurodisco.' And on "Havoc Man," a peculiarly accented drum pattern tends, I think, to throw Piavini's timing off. But who cares? There's a great deal to get out of it by actual observation. And right now I want to bring in the *other* new Portion Control LP, *Simulate Sensual*, which I'm really wild about. You'll see why in a few lines. What *..Step Forward* does establish over its two sides are quasi-narrative **threads**, the kind that bind the record into a unified framework. To my mind they are everywhere; let's examine them now as well...

Another thread is more thematic, that is lyrically, and I can't quite figure it out. See, Havoc Man is not the only superhero-type name on the record; scattered throughout both disc and cover are to be found Tail-End Charlie, Stamina Stan... kind of possible nomenclatures for the cutesy robot pictured on the cover jacket...kind of refugees from the PC video game that never was.

its turn recalled PC work done two years before *it*, from *Hit the Pulse*, and further back in time to "Raise the Pulse" and "I Staggered Mentally," which is the title song to an LP now long deleted. So PC reuses old material, reworking it, as the chord sequence of "Elektrotechnik" became "Death by Venom," and as "He is a Barbarian" became "Thrust Angle."

Into the past. As was mentioned, I don't find *..Step Forward* perfect. I think they try too hard now, and perhaps they've become a bit image-conscious; I can't tell. They've disappointed me in that, as they've made the gradual shift from low- to high-tech, they've sacrificed a quantity of innovativeness. For example: I know from personal experience that crummy drum machines produce stilted, but downright peculiar drum lines. *Simulate Sensual* is full of weird, clunking, but (look out) exuberant drum and synth lines, whereas all that *..Step Forward* can offer in that area is the deliberately mis-accented beat in "Havoc Man" —the rest approaches the simply conventional. Also, I've realized that three songs, mind you three, are built around virtually the same three-note sequence: B-D-E-A; these are "Real Estate Cult," "Refugee," and "Under the Skin." The last two of these, moreover, follow each other on record, and that's a thread that I don't believe they intended. I also think that "Under the Skin" would make a better single than "Havoc Man." But even with the excellence of production in *..Step Forward*, I personally prefer the simple, backwards ingenuity of *Simulate Sensual*; and so now I turn to it.

If I failed to mention it earlier, *Simulate Sensual* is In Phase Records' collection of their work from 1980-1982. Much is culled from an early cassette release entitled *With Mixed Emotion*, which (as much as I dislike choosing favorites) I really adore. In fact it is my only reservation that the cassette is not represented here as a whole, as (1) it really ought to be completely available on vinyl, and (2) it sorely needs remixing. But of those tracks that are there, I could not be happier that "Come Alive!", "He is Patriotic," "Moving Towards a Waste," and "Le Crunch" are among them. Now, on cassette, "Le Crunch" follows "Come Alive!" to close its first side climactically and beautifully. Unfortunately the two are separated on disc. Sigh.

The remaining tracks comprise soundtrack and hitherto-unreleased work from a later period —and there is not one track from *I Staggered Mentally*, curiously. The compilation disc, pressed on clear vinyl, goes a long way in illuminating the band's development, from the depths of obscurity and tech-no (or no-tech) to the more full-blooded and fully realized sound of 1982 and 1983; when it all became bigger for them, and when the band could first consider itself a full-time commodity (both Ian Sharpe and John Whybrew came from the wondrous world of catering and food preparation; it is from there the term Portion Control stems). Which brings us...

Into the present. Portion Control will continue, will know a degree of prosperity; this much I predict. They will win the merrie hearts of trillions, and without the tactics of the junk-funking SPK that so many have found 'questionable.' Which is all fine. And of course the BBC need never reveal what SPK *really* stands for. The subject here though is Portion Control, however. I enjoy PC's music even if I do reserve a preference for the early work. I just hope that they'll be able to go wherever it is they're going without too great a loss of their group identity.

 $-\text{CH}$ 

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# NOCTURNAL EMISSIONS



Design art/Nocturnal Emissions

records ("Delgado Monkey Torture" from *Festivals of the Himalayas, Volume II*). As can be expected with most twelve-inch singles, rhythm takes a predominant musical emphasis on the A-Side track, "No Sacrifice." This track illustrates perfectly the didacticism mentioned earlier. Another thing that always distinguished their sound from others was Ayers' original sense of humor, which infected everything the Emissions did. Now, heavy sarcasm seems to have taken the place of real wit and, more importantly, so has a sense of real political horror:

Here we go and here we go  
Falling like cherry blossoms  
Under the hooves of race horses  
And under the wheels of Rolls Royces  
And chained to chain link fences  
Falling falling sacrifice...

Both this track and the B-Side "Uprising" share a usage of radio news broadcasts, both of which select reports of violence perpetrated against strikers and demonstrators.

Musically, the band (how many are left in it?) shows that its curiosity for the synthesized has not abated. This means sequencers and better drum machines than *Viral Shedding* ever had. Also, as can be expected, recording quality is far superior. Whether this means they have been buying instruments or renting better ones is unknown and probably irrelevant. As a vocal frontman, Ayers seems hesitant and unsure yet, overcompensating with a voice reeking and redolent of sarcasm. This is different from the outright humor of earlier years (as on "More Mumbo Jumbo" from *Dyskenesia* and *Befehlsnotstand*), and is somewhat less effective. What happens eventually, courtesy of the mix, is that Nocturnal Emissions' own brand of sonic confusion begins to sweep over his voice, reducing it to the watery background he's more comfortable with. The track ends with (what else?) a recording of "God Save the Queen" played backwards. Or as they interpret it on the cover sleeve, "Kween Save Thy Bog." The B Side, "Uprising," continues the confusion amid the rattling off of what amounts to a political manifesto (Emissions Tract #3, perhaps?) which is perhaps most revealing about Ayers' present train of thought:

"It's not sufficient  
To merely identify or list  
The crimes committed against us  
We must resist the media lie  
That says all this is inevitable  
That it's human nature  
Each of us are participants  
The powers that be  
Have created a job for us all  
In maintaining the colossal con-trick  
that keeps us all in line  
That keeps us apart from each other  
Only meeting to compete  
Destroying our loved ones  
Destroying other people like us  
In the same shit as us  
How much more of this are you willing to take?  
It's time to take the offensive for a change  
We've stood by passively for far too long  
While they parade their symbols of power  
In front of us  
Their death technology..."

Sorry for the long excerpt, but it continues like that, and it is not without interest. What makes this noticeably different from their earlier work is this direct approach. It is as revealing as it is narrowing, for an approach as claustrophobic as this leaves almost no room for expansion; actually, for the very uprising they call for. Although the political situation is far less tense in this country than it is in ideology-torn England, still it is no less true that it is simply not enough to merely point out the problem. Yes, of course there is cultural repression, but it is not enough to merely identify it; neither is it enough to shout it from the rooftops. Somewhere along the line a more consistent plan of development must arise to replace the old thinking with new. Stated more simply, it is not enough to identify control patterns, and to think about their crushing weight at all times. The unconscious mind and body must react as well, without labels and without obvious and repressive brands of hierarchical politics. Nocturnal Emissions has here a political outlook no less self-defeating (to be brutally frank) than that of Royal Family and the Poor, a band on Factory Records with a new LP and a peculiar brand of slogan-shouting anarcho-socialism. I hope Nigel Ayers doesn't get angry when he reads this.

"No Sacrifice/Uprising" is a good single however, and very commendable. Most importantly, it signals the resurgence of Nocturnal Emissions, one of the strongest and most human voices in the British music underground.

—CH

## LIFE AT THE TOP...

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*Chaos*. Not enough recordings have that title. And it can be considered unfortunate that Nocturnal Emissions may never survive long enough to see it come to pass, even in the witty spirit in which they've meant it. However the band has now released among other things one further documentary in sound, a cassette-cum-mini-LP of one of their last performances before becoming temporarily inoperative.

Recorded at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton on June 9 1983 (their final performances before going into seclusion were in August of that year, or thereabouts), this performance summarizes and encapsulates all that they were before and after their 'turning-point' LP, *Viral Shedding* (Illuminated Records, deleted). Although the record itself holds up extremely well, the group claims to have had numerous problems with it, largely because of the record company. The LP exerts a strong influence upon the *Chaos* performance, however, as its various tracks emerge under different names (Two tracks appeared previously on vinyl, on Sterile Records' *Befehlsnotstand* LP).

The live record, which has been released by the tiny Cause for Concern label, has been known mostly for cassettes; perhaps if they can afford vinyl their situation is improving. The recording quality is fairly good, although it is obviously an audience recording. It is better anyway in quality than the two live tapes which Nocturnal Emissions released on their own, *Deathday* and *Wisky-A-Go-Go*.

The band had actually begun to make a name for itself in 1983, emerging on several important compilations: *Rising From the Red Sand*, the *Alchemy* video from TwinVision, *The Elephant Table*, *Touch: Meridians 2*, and one of the Italian Trax International records. Would that they could produce one high-tech single, right? Hold on to your party hats.

Group leader Nigel Ayers said in early 1984 that at least two members of Nocturnal Emissions were working on a new group, The Dispossessed, the name being based on the book by Ursula LeGuin, which they recommend. It seems that this never came to pass, for Nocturnal Emissions has just reawakened with a new twelve-inch (and relatively high-tech) single, which is somewhat odd, because at last check, which was about fourteen months ago, according to Ayers, "Sterile is just me copying tapes now." It may be supposed that *Alchemy* was one of those tapes, that is, the C-60 of the video (which is available in this country through Fresh Sounds of Lawrence, Kansas).

The cassette contains work by many European artists of interest—all otherwise unreleased work—including SPK (pre-"Metal Dance"); Mark Pauline; Die Todliche Doris; Test Department; La Loora; and Portion Control, who perform a live version of "Chew Ya to Bits."

The cover of *Chaos*, being similar to that of *Befehlsnotstand*, is a collage of war photos from newspapers, advertisements for happy pills, and pictures of artillery shells. There's also a picture of a slug (the insect kind), one of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (speaking, appropriately enough, before a brick wall painted with the word "WAR"), and a nice little commentary by the Emissions—a friendly jab in the side of noise and SPK-type groups: A housewife from a magazine ad stands in a kitchen heaped high with pots and dishes, and remarks (courtesy of a word balloon that they've stuck above her head), "I'll make myself a percussion set! This trash can will come in handy! ...As well as this eggbeater!"

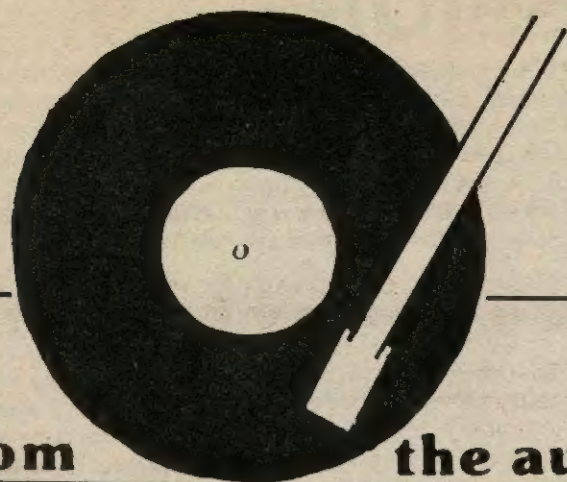
But you know, aside from being able to picture the vocalist at the mike, it's really difficult to tell from this one recording what one of their shows could have looked like then, especially since they relied so heavily upon the tapes (music included) of *Viral Shedding*. Perhaps they were only fiddling with noise-makers. In any case, however, *Chaos* has all the signs (symptoms?) of being a very peculiar performance—the kind we don't see every day in the US.

The record seems a bit hard to find in New York, although more than one store has carried it at one time or another. An early studio LP, *Fruiting Body*, has for some reason just been rereleased under a new cover. In playing *Chaos*, it is wise to take the Emissions' 'sound' advice: "PLAY LOUD. RAISE THE DEAD." Perhaps if you expire after listening to the record, someone else will play it and raise you.

Now it's time for the unveiling. This refers to the new and pointedly rhythmic single "No Sacrifice/Uprising," which marks the first release of a Sterile record since *Befehlsnotstand*. What it shows more than anything else is that the group may have been down, but it is not out. It also highlights an increased emphasis upon didacticism by Ayers, who on this occasion assumes the role of an outright vocal frontman. All lyrics are even reprinted on the outer sleeve, that no boob may misconstrue the point and purpose.

In the past, Nocturnal Emissions has constructed immense walls of sound tempered (increasingly) with popular rhythms. They've lifted rhythms directly from David Bowie ("Suffering Stinks" from "Let's Dance") and Dexy's Midnight Runners ("Going Under" from "Come On Eileen"), as well as from Nonesuch Explorer





from

the audiofile

## GILBERT & SULLIVAN THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

BY W. S. GILBERT &  
ARTHUR SULLIVAN



D'OYLY CARTE'S OPERA COMPANY

The Best Gilbert & Sullivan Ever: In Glorious Mono The Complete Electric D'Oyly Carte Company Recordings of *Trial by Jury*, *HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Patience*, *Iolanthe*, *Princess Ida*, *The Mikado*, *Ruddigore*, *The Yeoman of the Guard*, and *The Gondoliers*, some paired with abridged recordings with the same basic casts. Arabesque Records

The British and American musical theater was never the same after *HMS Pinafore* (1878) taught audiences that a libretto could stand on its own as thoroughly good poetry, and that a major composer could elevate the words even higher by excellent melodies which are at once cleverly appropriate and memorable. Gilbert did not seek to shake his society to the roots, only to rid it of some of its affectations. Sullivan, as the legend goes, was always somewhat ashamed that his reputation as a Victorian composer was based more on the rock-firm foundations of the "Savoy" operas than on the respectable cantatas, anthems (yes, he *did* write "Onward, Christian Soldiers"), and theatrical incidental music that a gentleman of his station was expected to turn out. But the public loved the operas, and is still demanding more to this day.

If you caught George Rose as Major-General Stanley in Joseph Papp's *Pirates*, at the Delacourt Theater or on the screen, you then have some idea of what G&S buffs call the "Savoy tradition" (The Savoy was the theater built by Richard D'Oyly Carte in 1881 to house his and G&S's company). An important feature of that tradition is the ability to deliver the most absurd lines with the utmost of seriousness (as in any good performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*), and to deflate a social pretension or two in some Wouldwit who "never would be missed." What was lacking in the rest of Papp's cast was the *stuffiness* so essential to Gilbert's satire; what was also missing was the beauty of Sullivan's orchestrations (Sullivan was one of that rare kind of composer who could compose directly onto scoring paper, while others had to write the piano reductions).

Of the fourteen operas produced by Gilbert and Sullivan between 1871 and 1896,

# CLASSICAL RECORDINGS

all but the first (the music to *Thespis* was never published and was consequently lost) have been recorded for a grand total of about seventy times in their complete versions (some of the more recent versions included the spoken dialogue as well), with *The Mikado* being represented by eight of them.

The history of these recordings falls into four areas: early acoustic, electric, mono LP, and stereo LP. By far the best are the acoustics and electrics made by the D'Oyly Carte Company with casts grounded solidly in the tradition, some of whom sang under Gilbert's personal supervision. Short of having original-cast recordings, more authentic than this you cannot get. Alas, the muddy sound of the acoustics must preclude them from the present consideration; but those electrics! Recorded on twelve-inch 78's during the late 1920's and early 1930's by HMV in England and RCA Red Seal in this country, they represent the finest records (in both senses of the word) of the ten operas then in the company's repertory. This means there is no *Utopia*, *Limited* or *Grand Duke* at all, or a complete version of *The Sorcerer*.

When Arabesque Records, in the fall of 1985, issues *Ruddigore*, the entire electric series will be available on LP and cassettes. These are deserving of very serious attention. Each opera is a landmark in the history of musical theater, and each set is a very model of what a Gilbert and Sullivan recording should be.

With the exception of *Ruddigore*, which has never been recorded without the cuts inflicted on it for its first revival in the 1920's, and *Princess Ida*, which lacks only one song cut for its revival, these recordings are musically complete. The earliest two, *Trial by Jury* and *The Gondoliers*, are conducted by Henry Norris, who had also led the acoustic versions; the rest are under the baton of Sir Malcolm Sargent (a name well known to lovers of classical music). Of course the sound itself is 78-mono, and every now and then the *fortes* come over as a blur. Of course, we can occasionally sense the music racing to finish before the needle hits the label. This is all part of the fun.

As one listens to the entire set, one comes to love certain members of the cast. Derek Oldham, who takes all of the tenor roles except that in *Pinafore*, has that creamy kind of voice and distinctly British vowel pronunciation that are now so out of date and so very appropriate to G&S. George Baker, who never sang with the company but was asked to make these recordings because of his remarkable elocution and ability to make the fastest patter songs understandable, absolutely dazzles with the comic leads in five of the sets (and lesser parts in two of them). In three of the sets, the leathery, gravelly voice of the venerable Sir Henry Lytton takes the comic lead and brings us even closer to the originals, since he was the understudy to George Grossmith (who created most of these roles and whom Lytton eventually replaced in Gilbert's lifetime).

The soprano parts are shared by Winifred Lawson (the best of them all) and Elsie Griffin, both of whom know how to inject just that right amount of seriousness and twinkle which is requisite for this type of role. The contralto roles are shared by the mellifluous Bertha Lewis and the somewhat drier-voiced Dorothy Gill.

It should be mentioned here that the cast of *The Mikado*, which was recorded last in the series, replaces George Baker with a young Martyn Green, whose voice and concept of Ko-Ko is marvelous here, but was to degenerate in his two later recordings of the role. The only weakness of this set is the lightweight Katisha of Josephine Curtis, while a great asset is the nasal snobbery of Sydney Gramville's Pooh-Bah (who was in the 1938 movie version with Kenny Baker).

The best singer of the lot is the bass Darrell Fancourt, whose Mikado-laugh is literally chilling, and whose Dick Deadeye can make one hiss in the best melodramatic tradition. And while it is very difficult for a singer to be funny as he keeps the beat faithfully, the bouncy voice of the comic bass Leo Sheffield keeps one smiling, especially in his two Policeman's songs in *Pirates*.

As a bonus, Arabesque has included abridged versions of some of the operas, as done by the D'Oyly Carte with somewhat different casts; and it is most interesting to compare renditions in these versions with those in the complete ones. By the way, the *Pinafore/Trial by Jury* pairing (and this really becomes worthwhile) is introduced by an Edison cylinder of Sullivan himself!

The following is a run-down of the series:

- 8052-2L *Trial by Jury/HMS Pinafore*
- 8068-2L *Pirates of Penzance/Sorcerer* (abridged)
- 8095-2L *Patience/Gondoliers* (abridged)
- 8066-2L *Iolanthe*
- 8129-2L *Princess Ida/Pirates of Penzance* (abridged)
- 8051-2L *Mikado*
- 8139-2L *Ruddigore* (pairing not yet decided)
- 8067-2L *Yeoman of the Guard/Mikado* (highlights)
- 8058-2L *Gondoliers*

A final word of advice is helpful for those unexposed to the plays; it can be a wonderful experience to sit with a copy of the full text (only the lyrics are provided with the sets) while playing the tapes or discs, and stopping to read the dialogue at the appropriate places. When one has become familiar with the complete item, he can then enjoy more fully what will no doubt be many repeated listenings of the musical portions.

Thank you, Arabesque.

—Frank Behrens